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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000879

SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: UPON RELEASE FROM JAIL, BNP LEADER KHALEDA ZIA
WILL FACE PRESSURE TO REUNIFY PARTY AND CONTEST ELECTIONS

REF: DHAKA 873

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Chief Adviser's comment on 8/13 that the Caretaker Government was working to free former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia as early as possible added fuel to speculation she would be released from jail soon. Though the timing and conditions of her release remain uncertain, not so the pressures she will face from within her Bangladesh Nationalist Party. In recent weeks, several senior party leaders have signaled privately a strong desire to patch up the nasty rift between Zia loyalists and reformers, and to participate in upcoming elections organized by the Caretaker Government. This building sentiment should make it more unlikely that Zia will call an election boycott if and when she is freed from prison,

BNP REUNIFICATION MAY BE NEAR

¶2. (C) Should Zia be freed soon, as the Chief Adviser's remarks suggested was possible, she would return to a party still split into two factions -- one loyal to her and the other supportive of the political reform agenda of the Caretaker Government. Although recent intra-party efforts to reunite the two sides were foiled by the Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI), according to senior reform leaders, both factions are optimistic they will reconcile soon. BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan, for example, told PolOff he believed Zia would reunite the party within days of her release. Lt. Gen. (ret) Mahbubur Rahman, a leading BNP reformist who has been in touch with Zia through her lawyers, also expects her to quickly patch up the party upon leaving jail.

WILL ZIA CATCH ELECTION FEVER?

¶3. (C) A reunified party would be an important first step to mounting a strong campaign in the Parliament election in December, for which there appears to be a growing groundswell of support among party faithful. Several senior party members told PolOff privately that BNP Secretary General Khondkar Delwar Hossain faced intense criticism for having the party boycott the August 4 mayoral elections that were swept by the rival Awami League. Publicly, many of them support Delwar's demands that upazilla (county) elections planned for October

should be delayed until after the Parliament election and that neither vote should be held until the State of Emergency was lifted. Privately, some sing a different tune indicating a willingness to negotiate.

¶4. (C) Standing Committee member Dr. R.A. Ghani, for example, indicated to PolOff that the BNP would compete in upazilla elections whenever they take place. (Note: Muhammad Nawshad Zamir, a lawyer for Tarique Rahman and Khaleda Zia negotiating their release, said he would challenge in court the Caretaker Government's plan to hold upazilla elections in October. While he believed he had a good shot at winning, he said he would urge the BNP to compete in the elections should the courts side with the government. End Note.) Nazrul Islam Khan, meanwhile, dismissed concerns of party colleagues that the DGFI would be able to manipulate the outcome of Parliament elections in favor of the Awami League, adding he was confident the BNP would do well. In a move that should help the party's electoral prospects, BNP central headquarters will send fact-finding teams throughout the country in the next few weeks to assess the status of local party organizations and rejuvenate them where necessary.

¶5. (C) Secretary General Delwar Hossain, however, in private talks with PolCon displayed neither Nazrul's electoral confidence nor the enthusiasm for elections expressed by other party members. He clearly was out of step with Caretaker Government advisers, the DGFI, and the Awami League, all of whom recently have shown a willingness to reach a broad political deal to ensure the country returns to democracy via credible Parliamentary elections. While the Awami League shares the BNP opposition to early upazilla

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elections and to maintaining the State of Emergency, it also is emphasizing the need to be flexible. Awami League Acting General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam, for example, told PolOff he could envision holding some upazilla elections in October and some after the Parliament vote. He also said the Caretaker Government could lift the State of Emergency and then reinstitute some key provisions via presidential proclamation.

CONCLUSION: WAITING FOR ZIA

¶6. (C) When Khaleda Zia walks out of jail, the prospects of her party participating in Parliamentary elections will receive a big boost but won't be assured. If she remains bitter about her detention and that of her son, who allegedly was tortured while incarcerated, she could adopt a hardline stance akin to that of Delwar Hossain. Perhaps a more likely scenario, however, is she will heed the advice of other senior BNP leaders and negotiate a grand political compromise under which her party could compete in credible Parliament elections. She might, as some suggest, even decide to replace Delwar Hossain. Which Khaleda Zia emerges from prison may be the biggest factor in determining whether Bangladesh smoothly returns to democracy this year.

Moriarty